

## QA 49 – Pica in Autistic Children

### QUESTION:

A mother of a three year old autistic child is concerned about her child's eating of non-food items. This family lives in a rural community with little support/experience. The child is at 50<sup>th</sup> percentile for wt/age and length/age. Her family works very well with her and a strict routine is used. Her diet as compared to other autistic children's diet is limited in protein and iron. She is not on any vitamin or mineral supplement. Mom states that the child aggressively seeks and chews paper products, with the book binding as her favorite, and bag wire twisties. Mom and doctor are very concerned about her safety. Mom wants to know if this is a typical behavior or could it be due to her limited diet/deficiencies and if there is a tasteless liquid vitamin or mineral supplement.

### ANSWER:

There is limited research with pica specifically in children with autism. Sturmey notes in The Journal of the American Board of Family Practice, "In persons with developmental disability, pica can take the form of eating a variety of nonnutritive substances. Pica can be a minor, but stigmatizing behavior that interferes with appropriate behavior and education".

Pica in some autistic children can be a self-stimulating activity. It is difficult to determine if pica is related directly to nutritional deficiencies. However, this child's growth parameters appear to be within the normal range for age. It is important to consistently monitor this child's growth and nutritional intake in relation to previous growth and dietary data.

A multi-vitamin would still be recommended to supplement the low intake of a variety of foods. According to Children's Hospital & Regional Medical Center Pharmacy in Seattle, Washington, there is no tasteless liquid multi-vitamin available at this time.

It is also important that the parents monitor this child so he/she does not ingest harmful substances. It is noted in American Journal Disabled Child, "Such children can ingest dangerous amounts of lead even in environments that are usually considered safe. Mean blood lead concentration was higher...Screening for blood lead should be part of the medical care of these vulnerable children with pica."

### References:

- 1) Sturmey, P. Pica and Developmental Disability. The Journal of the American Board of Family Practice Jan/Feb 2001; 14:80-81.
- 2) Children's Hospital & Regional Medical Center, Seattle WA. Pharmacy Department.
- 3) Cohen DJ, Johnson WT, Caparulo BK. Pica and Elevated Blood Lead Level in Autistic and Atypical Children. American Journal Disabled Child Jan 1976;130: 47-48.
- 4) <http://www.autism-society.org/>